



International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture Brief on the work and results of the ITF

The International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture (ITF) is composed of individuals working in government agencies, inter-governmental agencies, and civil society and other private sector organizations¹ involved in organic agriculture regulation, standardization, accreditation, certification and trade. These individuals joined forces in 2003 in an open-ended platform for dialogue among public and private stakeholders. The goal of the ITF is to address and seek solutions to trade barriers arising from the many different standards, technical regulations and certification requirements that function in the organic sector, and enable developing countries to have more access to organic trade.

The ITF is jointly led by FAO, IFOAM and UNCTAD. It focuses on opportunities for harmonization, recognition, equivalence and other forms of cooperation within and between government and private organic guarantee systems. Its results include technical studies and briefing papers, recommendations, tools for solutions and a communications program. The ITF's work and results have progressed in two phases.

The Review Phase of the ITF work identified and analyzed:

- Impact of existing organic certification requirements, standards and technical regulations on trade;
 - current models and mechanisms that enable organic trade;
 - experiences of cooperation, recognition and equivalence in the organic sector;
 - potential models and mechanisms for harmonization, equivalence and mutual recognition.

The results of this phase guided the exploration of potential solutions.

The Solutions Phase of the ITF produced two practical Tools for harmonization and equivalence:

- The International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies (IROCB), a reference norm that can be used by governments and private accreditation and certification bodies as a means of accepting certification of organic products outside of their own system.
- Guide for Equivalence of Organic Standards and Technical Regulations (EquiTool), a set of procedures and criteria for deciding when a standard applicable in one region of the world is equivalent to a standard applicable in another region.

During this phase the ITF also agreed to:

- Support the two International Standards for organic production and processing (IFOAM standards in the private sector and Codex Alimentarius Commission standards in the government sector), and encourage harmonization and equivalence based on these standards.
- Encourage other forms of cooperation within and between all levels: governments (with or without an organic regulation), accreditation bodies and certification bodies.²

International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture

Brief on the work and results of the ITF

In the course of its meetings the ITF made several recommendations. These include that:

- Governments and the private sector make every effort to utilize the Tools and other ITF results in order to facilitate trade, and include them in their efforts to build or enhance the organic sector;
- Governments commit to using international standards as the reference point for import approvals;
- Public-private participation is improved in decision-making for both international organic standards (IFOAM and Codex Alimentarius Commission);
- The International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies, in addition to serving as a reference for equivalence and recognition, should be considered as a catalyst for convergence of certification requirements in the long term and may be adapted for use in direct accreditation as possible;
- Consideration is given to emerging alternatives to third party certification, such as Participatory Guarantee Systems.

The work and results of the ITF, including its technical papers and reports, have been chronicled in a series of publications, "Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture." These publications are available in book form from the ITF Secretariat and in electronic format from the ITF Website, www.itf-organic.org.

The ITF appreciates the support of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), the Norwegian Agency for Development (Norad), and the Government of Switzerland for financial support to conduct its work and achieve its result.

¹ITF participants have so far come from government agencies of twenty-five countries (Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Costa Rica, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Fiji, Germany, Greece, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Japan, Netherlands, Philippines, Samoa, Sweden, Switzerland, Tanzania, Thailand, Tunisia, Uganda and USA), seven inter-governmental agencies (EU, OECD, FAO, UNCTAD, UNECE, UNEP and WTO) and eighteen civil society and other private organizations (Argencert, EcoCert, Ecologica, Green Net, IAF, ICEA, IFOAM, IOAS, ISEAL Alliance, ISF, JONA, Kawacom Uganda Ltd., KOAN, KRAV, Migros, Oregon Tilth, Rachel's Organic Dairy)

² Key examples of other forms of cooperation, such as the development of regional standards, are published in ITF technical papers.



International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture International Requirements for Organic Certifying Bodies (IROCB) *User Guide*

What is IROCB?

IROCB is a set of performance requirements for organic certification. It is a normative document based on the requirements of ISO Guide 65 and adapted for the organic sector. In IROCB, some requirements of ISO 65 are restated in an organic-sector context; and additional requirements common to government organic regulations and private organic guarantee systems are included. The level of detail and style of IROCB is tailored to serve its main purpose.

What is the main purpose of IROCB?

The main purpose of IROCB is to serve as a reference document for recognizing certification bodies and accepting their certification process for organic products. It is a tool for government regulators and private certification and accreditation bodies to use for accepting certification of products outside of their own system. It can be envisioned as a “common denominator” that reconciles the differences among various organic certification program requirements and facilitates their equivalence.

How would a government use IROCB?

A government authority would use it for approving imports of organic products that are produced and certified outside of its jurisdiction. In order to approve imports, the government would normally decide if the standards for production and processing under which the imported products are produced, and if the requirements under which the certification is conducted, are sufficiently similar (equivalent) to its own standards and requirements for domestic organic production and certification. The IROCB assists governments with this determination for certification program requirements.

In the case of certification program requirements, the government would accept that the requirements in IROCB are equivalent to its own and that they are a reasonable common denominator for the purpose of imports. When a certification body asks a government to recognize it and approve its certification for organic imports, the government would determine (either directly or by relying on other expert evaluation) if the program requirements under which the certification body operates comply with the IROCB. If yes, then the certification body would be recognized by the government.

Why would a government want to use IROCB?

IROCB can enable the governments of importing countries to streamline their process for approving imports. Using IROCB can be more efficient, transparent and equitable than mechanisms currently used for recognizing foreign certifications. IROCB can be directly incorporated into new regulations for organic imports. It can also serve in established regulatory programs as a tool to streamline the current decision process on imports. By using IROCB, governments can make it easier for their organic manufacturers and traders to conduct business and for their consumers to have access to organic products. Governments using IROCB can feel satisfied that for organic imports they fulfill the World Trade Association (WTO) guidelines on reducing trade barriers via equivalence. If many governments reference IROCB rather than requiring compliance with their country-specific certification requirements, equivalence will prevail and organic trade barriers will be greatly reduced.

International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture International Requirements for Organic Certifying Bodies (IROCB) *User Guide*

How would IROCB be used in the private sector?

Some organic certification bodies operate private sector organic labeling programs that are supported by consumer demand for their private certification mark. The private labeling systems must deal with clients (manufacturers and other traders) who want to source organic ingredients and products certified by other certification bodies. These private certification programs need a method to ensure that the organic certification process for their clients' purchased ingredients and products is sufficiently competent to provide trust. These private programs can also use IROCB as their reference to verify (either directly or via another expert evaluation) that certification of their clients' purchased ingredients and products operate under requirements that are sufficient to provide trust in the certification.

Private accreditation requirements, such as the IFOAM Accreditation Criteria, could also reference IROCB as an option for certification bodies to approve ingredients and products purchased by their clients.

Using IROCB can enable private certification and accreditation programs to increase efficiency and improve client services in their certification and accreditation processes; and therefore it can create more access to private sector certification, labeling, and accreditation programs.

Are there any other uses or benefits of IROCB?

With some language adaptations, the IROCB can serve as a norm used directly for accreditation. Also, the ITF believes that if IROCB is widely adopted for recognition of organic certification bodies and/or as a basis for organic accreditation it will, in the long term, influence the convergence of the various organic certification requirements worldwide.

What assurances are given that IROCB is the "right" tool to use?

The ITF developed IROCB in a broad international consultation process that reached out to organic certification bodies, international accreditation programs, governments, intergovernmental organizations and other stakeholders. Four drafts of IROCB were developed and consulted prior to the final version, which is approved by the ITF. The result is a set of requirements that are generally agreed as providing confidence in certification for organic products that are traded internationally. Visit the ITF website for detailed information on the development of IROCB.

How are copies of IROCB obtained and questions about IROCB answered?

IFOAM, which has served as the Secretariat for the ITF, is providing ongoing services related to IROCB. To obtain either electronic or printed versions of IROCB, go either to the ITF website or to the bookstore on the IFOAM website, www.ifoam.org. Other services related to IROCB, including questions and comments, will also be handled by IFOAM.



International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture Guide for Equivalence of Organic Standards and Technical Regulations (EquiTool) *User Guide*

What is EquiTool?

EquiTool is a tool for judging equivalence between organic standards for organic production and processing.¹ It contains a set of procedures for the process, including an option for assessing an organic standard based on international standards and an option for assessing a set of (two or more) individual organic standards. The process is both narrated and illustrated in a flow chart. The guide includes criteria, drawn from the IFOAM system, that can be used to assess whether specific differences within organic standards can be rationalized in the context of equivalence. A practical template for tracking and managing the equivalence assessment process is included.

What is the main purpose of EquiTool?

The purpose of EquiTool is to serve as a guide for governments and holders of organic standards in the private sector to use when negotiating equivalence of their standard with the holder of another standard. Use of EquiTool can promote consistency, transparency, and equitability in equivalency processes for organic standards.

How would a government use EquiTool?

Governments wishing to enter into an equivalence assessment process would follow the process and criteria in the guide. Governments may choose to adhere to all steps and criteria, or they could select steps and criteria appropriate to their situation.

Why would a government use EquiTool?

EquiTool provides a blueprint so that governments can avoid developing equivalency processes and criteria themselves on a case-by-case basis. A Government that is new to the equivalence process for organic standards can consider adopting EquiTool as their own procedural document. Governments that are experienced in equivalency negotiation may refer to EquiTool for ways to expand and improve their processes.

Use of a common set of procedures and criteria will promote consistency in government equivalency negotiations. Because EquiTool was carefully developed within the frameworks of WTO principles and guidelines, and Codex Alimentarius Commission guidelines for the development of equivalence agreements, governments using this tool will meet their objectives to work within these international frameworks.

How would EquiTool be used in the private sector?

Some private sector organizations hold proprietary organic standards and operate organic labeling programs based on these standards. These private labeling systems must deal with clients, manufacturers and other traders, who want to source organic ingredients and products certified to standards other than their own. If a program wants to allow sourcing of such ingredients by its clients, it must have a process in place for assessing either compliance or equivalence of these other standards with its own. EquiTool can be a useful guideline for either compliance or equivalence of standards; however it will be most valuable when a private label program is open to accepting equivalent standards.

¹ Standards incorporated in government regulations are called "technical regulations."

International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture

Guide for Equivalence of Organic Standards and Technical Regulations (EquiTool)

User Guide

EquiTool could also be used as a blueprint in international equivalence processes such as IFOAM's program for recognition of other standards.

Are there any other benefits of EquiTool?

Although developed with reference to the organic sector, the procedures in EquiTool are fairly generic; and the criteria for variations in standards may also be adapted to other kinds of process and service oriented standards, especially those in agriculture. Therefore, EquiTool can serve as a model for equivalence procedures and criteria across a spectrum of standards worldwide. EquiTool should be of general interest to government and intergovernmental organizations and private sector standards organizations worldwide that are interested in the issue of equivalence.

What assurances are given that EquiTool is a credible approach for assessing equivalence?

The ITF developed EquiTool in a consultation process that included ITF members, organic certification bodies, standards setting organizations and other stakeholders. Three drafts of EquiTool were consulted prior to the final version, which is approved by the ITF.

EquiTool was developed within the framework of WTO principles and guidelines and is consistent with applicable provisions of Codex Alimentarius Commission guidelines for the development of equivalence agreements. EquiTool summarizes the applicable intergovernmental principles and guidelines in an appendix.

How are copies of EquiTool obtained and questions about EquiTool answered?

IFOAM, which has served as the Secretariat for the ITF, is providing ongoing services related to EquiTool. To obtain either electronic or printed versions of EquiTool, go either to the ITF website or to the bookstore on the IFOAM website, www.ifoam.org. Other services related to EquiTool, including questions and comments, will also be handled by IFOAM.



International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture ITF Recommendations

In the course of its meetings from 2003 to 2008, the ITF formulated a number of recommendations to the organic sector, which pertain to utilizing the conclusions, information and tools of the ITF to foster organic trade and increase access to organic markets.

The ITF Recommends that:

The International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies, developed by the ITF, should be used when regulating imports and developing requirements for organic certification bodies.

The International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies should be considered in the revision of the ISO Guide 65. Consideration should also be given to proposing IROCB as a work item to the Codex Alimentarius Commission.

Governments should utilize and encourage mutual recognition on the level of conformity assessment in their regulatory systems.

Other forms of cooperation in certification, accreditation and regulation should be initiated e.g. use of inspection (audit) and evaluation (assessments) for multiple purposes.

A platform should be created for cooperation among all governmental and private sector bodies that approve and/or accredit organic certification bodies.

IFOAM should proactively seek to evaluate the equivalence of organic regulations with the IFOAM Basic Standards

Major stakeholders should join forces to establish a common database of organic standards and regulations.

Consideration should be given to emerging alternatives to third party certification such as Participatory Guarantee Systems



International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture ITF Meetings, Administration and Participants

Meetings

First	18 February, 2003	Nuremberg, Germany
Second	20-21 October 2003	Geneva, Switzerland
Third	17-19 November, 2004	Rome, Italy
Fourth	28 February, 2005	Nuremberg, Germany
Fifth	5-7 December, 2005	Hammamet, Tunisia
Sixth	9-13 October, 2006	Stockholm, Sweden
Seventh	26-29 November, 2007	Bali, Indonesia
Eighth	6-8 October, 2008	Geneva, Switzerland

Steering Committee

Selma Doyran	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
Nadia Scialabba	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
Ulrich Hoffmann	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)
Sophia Twarog	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)
Antonio Compagnoni	International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM)
Gunnar Rundgren	International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM)

Diane Bowen	Secretary to the ITF
Matthias Fecht	ITF Coordinator
Katharina Pfundt	ITF Coordinator

Participants¹

Patrik Abei	Government	Switzerland	Karim Dahou	OECD	Intergovernmental
Per Ahle	Government	Denmark	Andrew Dale	OECD	Intergovernmental
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Charles Arden-Clarke	UNEP	Intergovernmental	Claudio Martin de la Souze	Government	Brazil
Christer Arvius	Government	Sweden	Katherine DiMatteo	NGO (OTA)	United States
Jenny Barnes	Government	Australia	Paddy Doherty	NGO (IFOAM)	International
Juan Batista	Government	Argentina	David Eboku	Government	Uganda
Samia Belkeria	Government	Tunisia	Felicia Echevierra	Government	Costa Rica
Bradley Mark	Government	United States	Reinaldo Figuerido	NGO (IAF)	International
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Yuan Ha Chen	Government	China	Don Gaidano	Trader	United States
Michela Coli	Certification Body	Italy	Katernia Giannoulia	Government	Greece
Ken Commins	Accreditation Body	International	P.V.S.M. Gouri	Government	India
Sasha Courville	NGO (ISEAL)	International	Natacha Guma	Government	Cuba

International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture ITF Meetings, Administration and Participants

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Vivian Liu	WTO	International	Christine Strossman	Government	United States
Zhenhui Lu	Certification Body	China	Adimaimalaga Tafunai	NGO	Samoa
Roy Lugone	Trader	Uganda	Anup Thakur	Government	India
Prabha Mahale	NGO (IFOAM)	International	Sanchai Tontyaporn	Government	Thailand
Kenji Masumoto	Certification Body	Japan	Herman Van Boxem	EU Commission	Intergovernmental
Patrick Mallet	NGO	International	Bo Van Elzakker	Accreditation Body (IOAS)	International
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Thierry Pomerlieu	Certification Body	United States	Johan Züblin	Trader	Switzerland
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¹ This list includes persons who attended at least one of the eight meetings of the ITF.